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Strange Illyria

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ALBANIA is not ordinarily the subject of grave concern in the foreign offices of the West. This today may be a mistake. Albania is an interesting country,

By William Pfaff

and now that Enver Hoxha is dead, the last of his kind, Albania becomes much more interesting. It might even become dangerous.

Albania has lived for 40 years in aggressive isolation, a result of Hoxha's rule but also of a peculiar history that has inclined Albanians to look upon outsiders with suspicion and find safety with family or clan. Its geographical isolation, and the combativeness of its people, are why British and American intelligence services launched an operation in 1949 to pry the country loose from the Soviet bloc, to which it then belonged.

Making use of the same people and techniques that earlier had been used to support Albanian guerrilla resistance to Axis occupation, several hundred men were infiltrated into the country over a period of four years to organize resistance to the Hoxha government. Half, at least, were killed or arrested. The operation failed because it was betrayed by Kim Philby, the British double agent initially commanding the British side of the affair, and because it was badly carried out, but also simply because things work in wartime that don't work in peacetime. In wartime, everything is contingent and people expect change. Resistance can be organized against an occupying army. This is not so easy to do when army and police are natives of the country, and when national tradition, in any case, is xenophobic and absolutist.

The Illyria of classical times, Albania was under nominal Byzantine rule until the Fourteenth Century, becoming an Ottoman conquest in the Fifteenth. As Ottoman power faded, Albanian rebellions in 1911-1912 compelled the Turks to concede autonomy, precariously maintained after the First World War, when the great powers set out to divide the country – only 120 miles long and 40 miles wide – among its neighbors. Woodrow Wilson's commitment to national self-determination stopped that.

Ahmed Zogu, who had served in both Ottoman and Austrian armies, struggled to power in the 1920s, made himself president in 1925, and became King Zog in 1928. Eleven years later he was out, as Italy seized the country. The partisan resistance which then developed depended upon the Yugoslav Communists, and got its arms mainly from the western allies. The Soviet Union had no part in Albania's liberation.

Hoxha imposed an absolute rule on the country which owed something to the national tradition and much to the Stalinism that had prevailed in the Communist International during the years of his own political formation. He committed the country to Stalin, and broke with Yugoslavia when Yugoslavia broke with the Soviet Union in 1948. He broke with Moscow, in turn, when the Russians broke with Stalinism and resumed relations with Yugoslavia. He broke with China in 1978, when China resumed relations with the Soviet Union.

It can safely be said that the key to Albanian policy was always the relationship with Yugoslavia, and the search for an external ally to guarantee Albania against what the Albanians have understood to be the permanent threat of partition and foreign domination. For more than a century Yugoslavia (earlier, Serbia) has controlled the region of Kosovo, where there are a million Albanians, between a third and a half as many Albanians as live today in Albania itself.

Enver Hoxha's successor, Ramiz Alia, is talked about as a man who will open up the country, politically and culturally. There is no particular evidence for this, but isolation and autarchy will not be easy to maintain. Unlike Hoxha, educated at a French university and briefly a diplomat before the war, Mr. Alia scarcely knows the outside world. Since becoming a partisan in his teens, he has made his career wholly within the Albanian Communist apparatus. He has, however, spoken publicly of the need for economic reform.

The Brezhnev Doctrine, so-called, as announced by the Soviet Union at the time of its invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, holds that Communism is an irreversible political condition, and that this theoretical point will be assured by the Soviet Army – at least, in those Communist countries the Soviet Army can get at. In the Albanian case, there is a problem: Yugoslavia lies in the way.

This is why the Albanian situation is interesting. It has amply been shown in Eastern Europe that only the Soviet Army blocks the progress of nationalism, ideological deviation, revisionism, reform – and even of democratization. Albania is poor, backward, ignorant, but has already amply demonstrated its nationalism. It recently has improved relations with Italy (historically, its window to the West), Greece, and, guardedly, Yugoslavia. It will soon have a rail connection to Western Europe by way of Yugoslavia. Its western trade has slowly been increasing. A few tourists come. Inevitably, new thought will come too. The Albanians have the means to decide their own future; and what they decide will have an echo in the rest of the Communist world.